A black and white photograph of a snowy landscape. In the foreground, a wooden fence with three horizontal rails runs across the frame. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow, with some bare branches and evergreen trees visible in the background. The lighting is soft, creating a serene and quiet atmosphere.

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SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ FEBRUARY 2004

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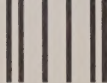
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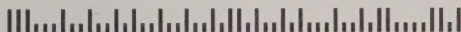
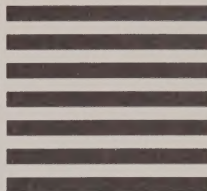
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C O N T E N T S

Vol. 55, No. 1, February 2004

NEW BEGINNINGS

Howard S. Ende 2

REFLECTIONS

Frederick J. Olessi 4

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

An Interview with
H. Bloomfield & P. Goldberg 6

SPIRITUALITY & SERVICE

Being of Service, With Love
Louise Hutner 12

Meditation Brings Clarity
Eknath Easwaran 17

ILLUMINATIONS 22

SPIRITUALITY & EVERYDAY LIFE

Practicing Gratitude
Desiree' Uhrich 23

THE WAYS OF PRAYER

Hijacked by Prayer
Kat Griffith 26

PRAYERS 30

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

Healing the Heart
Mary Chandler 31

Prayer for Love
Don Miguel Ruiz 34

PILGRIMAGE

The Labyrinth as Teacher
Ann E. Hossler 37

POETRY 41

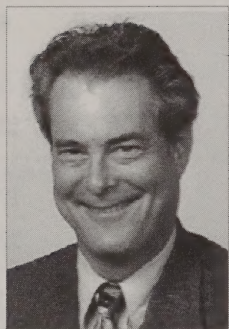
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Bottled Water
Susan Gregg-Schroeder 42

SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE

Caregiving for Justice
Durrell Watkins 46

NEW BEGINNINGS



The holidays are now a memory, but their spirit and meaning—the coming together of very different peoples and traditions in peace and harmony, sharing, and giving thanks—should be with us throughout the year. As I contemplate my first *SACRED JOURNEY* message as President, it seems most appropriate to use this opportunity to give thanks to those who have given so much to Fellowship in Prayer, and who continue to inspire us. In that spirit, and with grateful appreciation, we give our heartfelt thanks to those who are assuming emeritus status.

PAUL WALSH who provided leadership for more than twenty years of service to Fellowship in Prayer in the capacities of Executive Director, President of the Board of Trustees, and as Trustee. His many years of service and dedication to the ideals and mission of our organization have left a deep impact not only on the organization itself, but more importantly, on the lives of the many people with whom he has come into contact during his own sacred journey.

REBECCA LAIRD who provided editorial leadership for forty-five issues of *SACRED JOURNEY*, making our journal an extension of her own very special and beautiful spiritual presence, and bringing comfort, joy, and strength to our many readers.

JOE WILLIAMSON for his wise counsel and spiritual clarity as a Trustee, illuminating for us the path of our mission.

Many thanks also to those who continue to serve Fellowship in Prayer so faithfully: Linda Baumann; Cecilia Rousseau; Louise Hutner; and Trustees Fred Olessi, Trime Lhamo, Lorraine Sciarra, Arthur Caliandro, and Ann Quinn; and to you, our loyal readers and supporters.

We are now in the process of identifying successors to Paul and Rebecca, both of whom have most graciously agreed to make themselves available as necessary to help us continue our operations and publish our journal during this period of transition. I look forward to introducing our next executive and editorial leadership in a future edition of *SACRED JOURNEY*.

Until then, blessings.

REFLECTIONS



I think of the insights I have gained in almost two decades of being involved with this publication, and I am awed by such a collection of wisdom from people like myself who will ask and look until we are no more, and I remain profoundly grateful for these honest seekers. The mere framing of the question distinguishes our species, even if we have rarely in history taken count.

And yet we hear the laughter of a child, a sunset that raises us, and the pungent music of the life around us, and we continue to wonder in joy and in pain—why am I here, what do I do, and how can I contribute. And here is the value of *SACRED JOURNEY*—the other in face to us, helping and soothing.

Harold Bloomfield and Philip Goldberg wrestle with “the peace of God” and our part in making that peace a transcendent part of our lives. Louise Hutner describes a seminar led by Caroline Myss on “The Power of Service,” discussing the search for our life’s purpose. Eknath Easwaran develops this theme by explaining how to find our answers through meditation, a way of compassion and truth—inside us, always inside us if we listen to the silence. Ann Hossler describes how a labyrinth serves as a meditation tool for this process. Kat Griffith talks about the evolution of her prayers from self-centered requests to spiritual prayers for guidance to her life’s purpose.

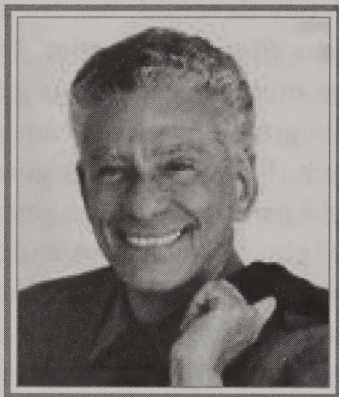
And then there is the glorious prayer of Saint Francis,

someone I feel very deeply about. My wife and I lived in Italy for a period of years, and one early morning, two days after Christmas after having arrived in Assisi after Midnight after a long drive from Sicily, I got up very early to go into the Basilica of the Saint. I saw a sign pointing downward to his tomb, and I descended. The church and that chapel were completely deserted, but there were lit candles and red Christmas flowers all about. I sat in the front pew savoring those moments when I began to hear the Franciscan Monks begin their Gregorian chants in another part of the church. I thought I was going to lose it right there, when an old priest came in to say a mass at the tomb. He seemed delighted I was there and motioned to me to help him serve the mass. How he knew I was once an altar boy who had severely lapsed into the world, I do not know to this day. But he told me afterwards, Saint Francis always brings someone such as me to his tomb when someone is needed.

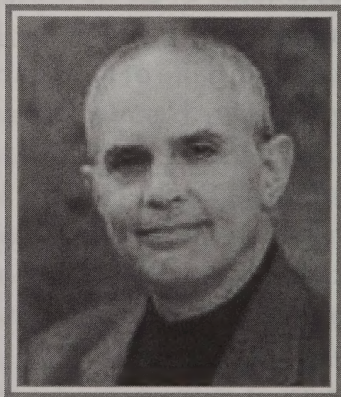
Desiree' Uhrich tells us of her grateful communion with God through mindful moments of beauty everywhere, even in a bleak winter landscape. Mary Chandler finds peace in her late mother's gift of faith and love despite a life of hardship. Susan Gregg-Schroeder tells of an elderly woman who radiates God's love and peace through her reverent use of holy water for everyday tasks. And lastly, Durrell Watkins learns the fundamental lesson with which we opened this issue: that peace and love make a far more fulfilling and ethical pathway through life than force and violence.

And here, in totality, another sharing of *SACRED JOURNEY*. It is the earnest hope of all of us associated with **Fellowship in Prayer** that you are as warmed as each of us by the sharing.

Harold Bloomfield



Phil Goldberg



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



An Interview With Harold Bloomfield & Phil Goldberg, Authors of *Making Peace with God*

Harold Bloomfield, M.D. and Philip Goldberg, Ph.D. have recently written a book about our journey to make peace with the supreme mystery that many of us call god, and to be at peace with ourselves. No matter what our faith; whether we are religiously affiliated or spiritually independent; whether we use the word god at all, they believe that we all share this goal of peace.

Drawing on the wisdom of great spiritual leaders from all traditions, together with notables such as Freud, Einstein, and the Rolling Stones, Bloomfield and Goldberg offer a practical and compassionate program for getting from our present state to one of unity with God, and experiencing the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical blessings that follow.

*Bloomfield, a renowned psychiatrist and the author of the classic *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*, and Goldberg, a spiritual counselor and interfaith minister, address in depth all the major conflicts that come between us and the Divine. They leave us with a renewed understanding of our place in the universe, and a clearer sense of our unique spiritual calling. The following interview discusses some of their thoughts about our need to make peace within ourselves, between each other, and with our god.*

Interview courtesy of Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Publishers.

Why is it so important to make peace with God?

If inner peace and spiritual fulfillment are not enough, consider this: your life may literally depend on it. Hundreds of scientific studies have found that religious commitment and spiritual practices can enhance health and well-being, including various factors associated with longevity. Interestingly, the research suggests that simply being religious or professing a belief in God is not quite enough; the quality of one's relationship with the Divine is also important. In one experiment, researchers found that "people who experienced disappointment, frustration or unforgiveness in their relationships with God reported more emotional distress than other people," and a survey of elderly hospital patients found that those with religious anxiety are likely to die sooner than their more sanguine counterparts. In other words, it's good for your health to have a relationship with God, and it's even healthier when that relationship is at peace.

What are the main obstacles that prevent people from making peace with God?

It may sound unfair, but the problems are all of our own making. God doesn't need to make peace; God is peace. It's we who create conflicts, and it's we who need to resolve them. We have to eliminate the black holes in our consciousness that suck away the light: our doubts, our illusions about God, our magical expectations, our erroneous beliefs, our anger, fear and resentment toward God, our secret pockets of guilt and shame that make us feel undeserving. In short, making peace with God requires making peace with ourselves, with life and all

that is. Above all, it means taking steps to close the gap between us and the Divine—a gap that doesn't really exist but only seems to.

What do you say to those who doubt God because of the evil and suffering in the world?

We can't have it both ways: either God can't stop bad things from happening, in which case he's not all powerful, or God doesn't care about our misery, in which case she's not all good. But there are other ways of understanding God than as a human-like parent who's supposed to watch over us. Ultimately, what enables some of us to transcend doubt while others turn to cynicism and despair is as much a mystery as God itself. Every religion explains these things in its own way, and no one answer will satisfy every person—especially when they are in the throes of loss or pain. The “Why?” of evil and suffering may always be unanswerable, but accepting that they are necessary companions to good in the mysterious wholeness we call God can help bring peace and dispel doubt.

What do you tell people who are angry with God?

People need to be given permission to express their rage and not stifle it out of guilt or fear. Otherwise it will fester and erupt in unwanted ways. God can handle it. In fact, anger is a form of communion, and it's a lot more “spiritual” than indifference. But they also have to understand that the God they are angry at is one they've created in their own minds, or a distorted image that was handed down to them. Usually, they are upset by the

circumstances of their lives and they need someone or something to blame. So they project human qualities onto God and take it out on him. But they are not angry at what God actually is, which is a force of infinite love and intelligence. Once the tantrum is over, they are encouraged to move beyond anger to love and gratitude. The book has many practical tools for moving this process along.

You distinguish between peace with God and the peace of God. Please explain.

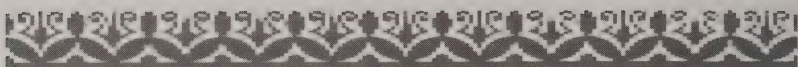
The two are mutually supporting: making peace with God deepens and makes more durable the peace of God, while experiencing the peace of God within enhances and supports our peacemaking efforts. Making peace with God is a psychospiritual process, something we work to achieve; the peace of God is a birthright, something that is eternal and unconditional, but has to be recaptured. Making peace with God is an act of doing; the peace of God is a state of being. Making peace with God is an activity of the mind, heart, body, senses and spirit; the peace of God transcends mind, heart, body, senses and spirit. The peace of God is always available, even while you are trying to make peace with God. That is because the very nature of the divine essence we call God is peace, and its Presence is within and around you, in the repose of the present. At any moment, you can, in the famous phrase from Psalm 46, “be still and know that I am God.”

How can we make peace with God if we can't make peace with each other?

Given the sad history of religious enmity and violence,

it's just as valid to ask, "How can we make peace with each other if we can't make peace with God?" The horror of 9/11 made it painfully clear how urgent it is for us to realize that we are all in God and God is in all of us. . . . Clearly, we must make peace with the God of all, not just the God we think is partial to our exclusive club. The challenge is to not just tolerate other religions, but to respect them, celebrate them, cherish them and humbly listen to their wisdom. Religions have more to learn from each other than to fear from each other. To fight over God, whose nature is love? To claim superiority in the name of that which should evoke humility? To pit one form of worship against the other when we should all kneel together? It is more than a dishonor; it is a disgrace. Nothing could be more contrary to the spirit of the holy ones whose revelations birthed the world's religions. It is time for the clergy of all faiths to call attention to our oneness, and to light the spark of divinity that rests within every human soul.

SPIRITUALITY & SERVICE



Being of Service, With Love

Louise Hutner



I went to a seminar a few weeks ago given by Dr. Caroline Myss. The title was "The Power of Service." I've been wanting for some time to hear her talk and the synchronicity of this event with my life at the moment was striking. Dr. Myss is renowned for her books, first *The Creation of Health*, coauthored with Dr.

Norman Shealy, and then three New York Times best sellers: *Anatomy of the Spirit*, *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*, and *Sacred Contracts*. She is equally well-known as a lecturer, and a workshop and retreat leader. She has a BA in Journalism, an MA in Theology, and a Ph.D. in Energy Medicine. What would bring her to our small college town to talk about the power of service? I learned that a dear friend of hers asked her to give a benefit presentation for our local Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Of course, she doesn't know our soup kitchen, but in love and service, she donated her time for the evening.

Louise Hutner is interim editor for Fellowship in Prayer. She lives in Princeton, NJ with her three children, her late sister's son and his father, and pets that come and go.

The flyer described Dr. Myss as “world renowned for her writings and seminars designed to help people improve their well-being by working symbolically with emotional and physical events in their lives. She is a pioneer in the field of Energy Medicine, teaching people to let go of wounds from the past, learn to forgive, and direct their energies toward empowering spiritual growth.”

Intriguing. Let go of my wounds? Gladly. Learn to forgive? With pleasure. Use my energy for spiritual growth? How better to use it? These are concepts with which I’m intimately familiar. I’ve been walking this path for years, reading every book I can get my hands on, watching PBS specials, talking with like-minded people on the same journey, and spending much time in silence and solitude to pray, to meditate, to think and feel. My aim has been to grow and move forward with love and meaning. I was ready for her words.

Dr. Myss is an amazing little ball of energy and wisdom. I couldn’t begin to capture on paper all that she had to say, so mostly, I worked hard at listening for two and a half hours and wrote down little gems here and there. Here’s a bit of what she said, and how it touched me.

“You know what your greatest potential is? It’s to serve.” Nothing like getting right to the point. “Most of us now have a passion to be of service in our present spiritually-oriented world,” and “You are meant to be of service in a certain way.” You could almost hear several hundred inner voices asking, “Yes, and how do I know my way?” And Dr. Myss, who is known for her intuitive abilities, voiced that by saying, “How am I supposed to be of service? That’s fundamentally a spiritual question. . . . When you ask that question, then an awakening starts from within.” She said the Mystics contemplated for years before they asked the question, “For

what greater purpose has my soul incarnated on this earth?" Imagine, if we all had a clear and constructive answer to that question, what an amazing place this planet could be.

But we don't, and it's not, so that's why people like me come by the hundreds and thousands to listen to leaders in religion, philosophy, spirituality, and New Age topics like self-actualization.

One might think that Dr. Myss would spend the next two hours talking about the many, useful ways we could be of service to others: working in a soup kitchen, starting a homeless shelter, tutoring underprivileged children, or any number of volunteer activities that would make our community and our world a better place. But she didn't. That would have been too obvious. It would have undercut her purpose: to direct us within to find our own unique answers. It would have allowed us to avoid the self-examination that is fundamental to answering these life-defining questions.

This is where I stopped taking notes. She was too engaging and thought-provoking. It took all my concentration to listen and to absorb her words. A major theme that drew me in was her assertion that if we let our intuition guide us, we will discover what we are meant to do, throughout our lives, and the doing will vary in its type and its magnitude. Sometimes we may save a life. More often, we may change a life with a seemingly insignificant word or action, or by setting an example for others in the way we choose to live. "How little it takes to make a difference," she said.

So am I doing what I'm meant to do with my life?

I have spent countless hours thinking about these things, especially in the last several weeks. My father died six weeks ago. My younger sister died ten months before that. So as I

grieve my father's death, I am heading into the first anniversary of my sister's death. And I just passed through the anniversary of her six-year-old son's death, my nephew. What I know is that, for me, the answer lies in two words: love and service.

I have learned along the way that when I trust my intuition to lead me, my heart and soul and body respond as one, without questioning, in loving doing and being. My life feels the most profoundly meaningful then.

Last year at this time I spent much of every day for a month in the hospital with my sister. I am a single mother raising three children. I need to work to pay the bills. But my heart pulled me to the hospital every day because that's where my loving service was most valuable and necessary at that time. I lost clients and income. I lost Thanksgiving with my family. But those were only temporary losses that counted for so little compared to the gift of being able to serve a loved one as her life was ending. I did what I was drawn to do, and trusted the source of that pull, knowing it was true and good.

I felt that pull again during this past year as I made the twelve-hour-round-trip drive to visit my father once a month, sometimes twice, as his health steadily worsened. The last trip came with an emergency call from my mother encouraging me to get there as fast as possible so I could say good-bye. Two brothers and I raced through three states while our father lay barely breathing. He was seemingly unconscious but he held on for us. He waited until we arrived, gave us one last hour with him, and then let go. That one hour was precious time in which to tell him we loved him, to hold his hand and stroke his arm, to reminisce a little, and to appreciate every one of those last minutes together. It felt like so little to be doing in the face of such a

monumental moment, but to me it was an hour filled with incredible love flowing from us to my father, and back again. I don't know anything more meaningful or valuable than that.

I've come to believe that it's not just the particular doing that determines my life's meaning, but also what and how I'm being. I have strengths that have pulled me in certain directions and I've been lucky enough to have choices. My work and my interests have changed periodically and I'm learning to trust my intuition more as I continue to make choices. As Dr. Myss emphasized, we have more inner wisdom than we know. We can uncover it. We can trust it and use it to direct our path; and no matter what each person's path looks like, it can always be a path of service.

My evening with Dr. Myss was an affirmation of my trust in myself as I continue my journey. I didn't hear anything surprisingly new and unfamiliar, but I heard much about which I needed reminding. I heard familiar themes presented from a different perspective, in slightly different language, and that has prodded me to take a fresh look at my life. Her energy and enthusiasm were powerful and stirred something within me—a flame perhaps, or a love—that needs continual nurturing and renewal.

I've been given much in my life and I know that to whom much is given, much is required. That's fine with me. I love to give, to serve, and to love. That's what gives my life meaning.

MEDITATION BRINGS CLARITY



Ekhnath Easwaran

One of my old favorites, H. G. Wells, who was writing science fiction before the term was invented, tells a story about a child who ventures through a door in a garden wall and finds a world of happiness and harmony that feels like his true home.

For the rest of his life he longs to find that door again, but it has disappeared. Three or four times he does catch a glimpse of it unexpectedly, but always he has something urgent to attend to and lets the moment go. A good man, he gains success, prestige, and even political power for the benefit of society; yet he is constantly haunted for allowing something so precious to slip away.

This is an ancient theme in myth and fable: the search for something that makes life meaningful, something so essential that life seems wasted unless it can be found. In every culture and every age, sensitive men and women have been haunted by the most urgent of questions: "Who am I? Why am I here? Is there any purpose to my life, and if there is, how do I discover it?"

Ekhnath Easwaran (1911-1999) taught meditation to enthusiastic American audiences for more than thirty years. The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, which he founded in Berkeley in 1996, actively carries on his work with retreats, classes, a quarterly journal, and ongoing publication of his books and tapes. © Copyright 2003 by Blue Mountain Center of Meditation. Reprinted by permission of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Box 256, Tomales, CA 94971. Web site: www.nilgiri.org

And we look for answers everywhere. In every activity, the great mystics of all religions say, this is really what we hope to find: not money or possessions or pleasure or prestige, but a sense of meaning, a fulfilling purpose, and overriding goal. Yet the more we search like this, the less we find—and the more frantic the search becomes.

The black hole of desire

The Buddha has a vivid image for this. There is, he says, a fathomless hole in our consciousness that cannot be filled by any finite object. It is a drain without a bottom, and all of us are trying every day to fill it up. We bring pails of pleasure and prestige and pour the contents sizzling into the drain; it all disappears.

The Buddha is a gentle teacher. He does not call this evil; he calls it childish. Watch a little boy or girl at the beach trying to empty the ocean with a toy pail. That is very much the way the Compassionate Buddha looks upon all of us, rushing off every weekday at eight in the morning to fill up our little toy pails that have no bottom. Yet we go on trying, baffled. Isn't this what can make us happy? Everything and everyone around us says so. What is wrong?

I have had the pleasant privilege of knowing people in both India and America who have made a lot of money, attained fame, scaled the pinnacle of their careers. Taking the liberty of my role as a spiritual teacher, I have asked them, "Tell me, after all this success, have you found what you were looking for?"

After some hemming and hawing, those with sensitivity and self-knowledge confided, "No. Somehow it slipped through my fingers. I found nothing I could grasp, nothing I could hold on to."

Then they add poignantly, "But now it's too late. I can't start over again." And so they go on playing the same old game, growing more frustrated, more bitter, more confused.

Nothing external can fill an inner need

The world's mystics have a simple explanation for why this search is so confusing: These are *inner* needs; they can never be satisfied in the world outside us. Meaning, purpose, fulfillment, and happiness can only be found within. What we are looking for is hidden by the fog of the senses; to find it, we need to turn inward—into the realms of consciousness I call the world within.

Robert Browning expresses this in beautiful lines:

“There is an inmost centre in ourselves
Where truth abides in fullness
... and to *know*
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.”

Opening a way

The whole purpose of meditation is to open the “door in the wall” of consciousness and help us blaze a trail deeper and deeper until we reach the core of our being.

In the method of meditation I use, I recommend concentrating on passages from the world's great mystics and scriptures that express our highest ideals—for example, the Prayer of Saint Francis, which begins: “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.” Slow, sustained concentration on the words drives them deep into consciousness. Gradually the values they express become as real to us as anything in the world of the senses. But long before that, they begin to penetrate every aspect of our lives, integrating what we think with what we say and do.

In meditation I see a clear, changeless goal far above the fever and fret of the day. This inner vision fills me with unshakable security, inspires me with wisdom beyond the reach of the intellect, and releases within me the capacity to act calmly and compassionately.

Until I took to meditation, I could not even conceive of the existence of this higher dimension. It took years of systematic, sustained practice to dispel the enveloping fog produced by the restless mind in its frantic search for fulfillment in the world without. When this fog is dispelled completely, the Upanishads tell us what we shall see: "In the depths of meditation, sages saw within themselves the Lord of Love, who dwells in the heart of every creature . . . beyond time, space and causality."

Benefits begin the first day

Fortunately, we do not have to wait for this stupendous climax to start reaping the fruits of meditation. If we continue to practice regularly, benefits begin the very first day.

This must sound like a tall claim, but there is a simple explanation. The mind is an internal instrument we use in everything we do. Since meditation is training the mind, the concentration we give to the words of these inspirational passages improves every activity in our lives.

Mastery of the mind brings joy in its wake, and a security that nothing in this world can shake. Life is bound to strike unexpected blows, but we do not have to be anxious or afraid. I was very fearful as a boy, but today, after years of meditation, I tell life, "Bring me joy or bring me sorrow. I can make the best of whatever comes."

Put meditation first

That is why I urge everyone over and over again, "Put your meditation first and everything else afterwards." Everything will be done better if you follow this simple principle, because it is concentration on an overriding goal that integrates personality and brings clarity and fulfillment.

Conversely, if you keep compromising your meditation for other things, everything you do will suffer because you are scattering your focus and blurring your priorities.

To put meditation first, the very first thing is to resolve to do it every day: first thing in the morning, as early as possible, and always at the same time, letting nothing else get in the way. Whatever comes up, don't postpone your meditation and don't ever neglect it. Whatever the demands of your job, whatever pleasure temptations suggest, put your meditation first.

I know how difficult it is to practice this simple resolution in the hectic lives most of us lead today. But it will pay rich dividends in every aspect of your life, as I can testify from my own experience.

One reason I say to have your meditation at a fixed time is that it will become almost a reflex. Then there will be no irresolution—"Shall I do it or not?" Just as your body gets hungry at certain times of the day, your mind will wake up hungry for meditation. If you are ill, meditation will help. If you feel inadequate, meditation will help. If your morning is too busy, get up earlier; if you have trouble getting up earlier, go to bed earlier. Everyone has different variations of these problems, but where there is a will to meditate, you find a way.

ILLUMINATIONS



Today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

~ *From the Sanskrit*

Take time to be aware; it is the opportunity to help others.
Take time to love and be loved; it is God's greatest gift.

~ *Author unknown*

So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.

~ *Morrie Schwartz*

The time God allots to each of us is like a precious tissue which we embroider as we best know how.

~ *Anatole France*

God evidently does not intend us all to be rich, or powerful, or great, but He does intend us all to be friends.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Love comforteth like sunshine after rain.

~ *William Shakespeare*

SPIRITUALITY & EVERYDAY LIFE



Practicing Gratitude

Desiree' Uhrich

I sit today at my homemade altar—clay cross with the serenity prayer etched artfully on it, a beeswax candle in a holder that looks like it is made of stained glass, dried flowers arranged in an amber colored vase, and an iron bowl full of stones—all of this is resting on a partially refinished antique oak dressing table. Each of the objects is intended to remind me of God's natural world. I listen to an instrumental collection of hymns—"This is My Father's World," "Morning Has Broken," "Softly and Tenderly." The violins and the flute make the words to the songs unnecessary. There is beauty in simplicity.

I glance out the window—winter in North Dakota—the expanse of white is interrupted only by the drab brown of the dormant trees, the patches of dead grass, and the Christmas bulbs still strung on the deck railing. Even the sky is gray today. Wait a minute—a rush of vibrant azure settles on one of the naked branches, then another—blue jays, decked out year round in their summer finery, a vivid reminder of the surprising beauty of God's world.

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Robert F. Campbell

God's reminders are everywhere, but in nature he can be particularly flashy. Winter in North Dakota can sometimes be a test of endurance, but even here, perhaps especially here or in any extreme climate, God's presence is palpable in nature. The forecast today is calling for an Arctic blast—what a potent metaphor to think about the ferocity of God's love for us—and here we experience the power of wind more often than not. None of us much likes it, but maybe it would help to think of the wind as the Holy Spirit sweeping continually through our lives, challenging us and transforming us into better people, capable of great feats of stamina.

I think God is calling us to notice his creation at all times, but sometimes he does work especially hard to get our attention. I was turning up our driveway last night, thankful for my new snow tires, wondering how long it was going to take to melt all this wretched snow. Suddenly, that same snow seemed to light up magnificently. The multitude of glitters and sparkles seemed to be dancing and moving, inviting my delight. I know that my headlights were the literal cause of the action, but I felt like I was being treated to a holy light show with each individual snowflake a representation of God and the universe. The light show didn't last long, only as long as it took me to drive the eighth-of-a-mile from the mailbox to the garage, but it was a moment of utter gratitude and awe on my part.

These moments—whether they come as a result of watching a white tail deer leap over a barbed wire fence, hearing the soulful howl of the coyote, feeling the first tender grass on your bare feet or the Arctic wind on your face, tasting the sour bite of a chokecherry, or smelling the new lilac blooms—all of these moments, if experienced mindfully and with a certain degree of reverence, are holy moments and could not be any clearer invitations for communion with God.

THE WAYS OF PRAYER



Hijacked by Prayer

Kat Griffith

Several years ago this somewhat disorganized, go-with-the-flow Quaker surprised herself, and probably God: she committed to a daily spiritual discipline. I am not the daily routine kind of person. I have never needed that scaffolding to be productive or happy, and who needs discipline if you love what you do?

But the Spiritual Nurture Program for Friends in our area offered something I really wanted. In return, the program demanded that participants commit to a daily discipline.

I decided that my spiritual practice would be a combination of journaling, which I had done for decades, reading the Bible and other faith texts, and prayer and meditation. I will confess that I immediately started a separate journal for my spiritual practice. I soon realized, uncomfortably, the implication of this: that my spiritual life was somehow separate from the rest of my life. I wanted my “spiritual” journal to be reverent and Spiritually Correct—and I wanted to keep my “regular” journal to rant, complain, and do all the things I had always done in that journal.

Hmm. . . Where did I get the idea that God would be looking over my shoulder in one journal but not the other? I found I was censoring my spiritual journal to keep the ugly

Kat Griffith is a Quaker living in Ripon, WI. She and her husband homeschool their two children.

things out. It was clearly dishonest. I started to get embarrassed about my regular journal. The question, "Would I want God to read this?" started to pop up. This was a hugely important place for me to be: face to face with me . . . with God watching.

I am happy to say that I soon dispensed with the "special" journal and made do with one. Wince. I found that it was, after all, "not my brother, not my sister, but me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer. . . ."

I started applying prayers like so many band-aids to the scrapes, sores, and wounds of my life—both those I authored and those I suffered. I didn't always know how to do this. Sometimes the best prayer I could manage was a prayer to *want to pray*—to want to invite inward transformation.

Sometime that year I had my first experience of being taken over by a prayer. Women who've given birth will know what I mean. Once you start pushing, there's no going back. The contraction takes over your entire body. You are nothing but a vehicle for a cosmic push. You go along with it because you no longer have any choice.

I have prayers like that. They hijack me, midstream to someplace else, and take me where they want me to go. I'm so grateful for them—they feel like the moments when I'm closest to the Spirit. They're when God says, "Move over, kiddo, I've got plans for your prayer today."

I don't have prayers like that everyday, but until I started praying regularly, I never did, and I thought I was the author of my prayers. Hah! Now I know better. At their best, the prayers author me.

I've often been troubled by the "Ask, and you shall receive" idea. It has always brought to mind the kind of asking in the song "Mercedes Benz"—"Oh, Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz, my friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends. . . ." I never thought it

would reflect well on God to indulge us that way, and I have not experienced that God *does* indulge me in that way. That sort of prayer just hasn't worked for me, whatever the Bible seems to say.

I've come to believe that learning what to ask for is the real spiritual challenge. I've learned to let my prayers evolve. When a prayer isn't the right one, my heart knows it, and is restless. Usually if I keep trying, I come to the prayer that is the right one. I always know when it is—I get what early Quakers call the “peace penny”—a quiet, inner assurance,

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a sense of “turning, turning til I come 'round right.” Often, I get a new angle on a problem, a clearer understanding of what I must do, a robust sense of purpose.

I remember vividly the time some years ago when I first experienced a wrong prayer evolving into a right one. I was to play in a small community concert that afternoon, and I was worried. I started praying anxiously to play well. Something told me this was not the right prayer, so I modified it to: “Help me to be satisfied with how I play.” I added for good measure, “And help everyone else to be satisfied, too!” Better, but still fundamentally, “God, support my pride!” I continued to flounder, and got to, “Help me and everyone to enjoy the music.” Then finally the right prayer crystallized in my mind: “God, please help everyone to hear You in the music, however I play it.” Instantly, I had a most extraordinary experience: I heard, clear as a bell, the music I was to play that afternoon. It was absolutely perfect, absolutely beautiful, and breathtakingly real. I felt the presence of the

Spirit as palpably at that moment as I ever have.

I don't know how the audience experienced the music that afternoon, but I played with joy and an unfamiliar sort of confidence. Not confidence that I would play particularly well, but a deeper confidence that anyone who opened their heart to the music could hear what I had heard and be moved and brought closer to God by it.

I have found that my true prayers always boil down to "Thy will be done." But that prayer itself is rarely satisfactory for me. Often I don't know how to cooperate with the Divine will—or I know perfectly well, but can't get past my Attitude! Ego, petty resentments, failures to love, wounded pride, hurt feelings, and my unwillingness to forgive can all get in the way.

These days, I pray for clarity on how God wants to use me to be an instrument of His love, to be God's hands here on earth. I pray for God to mold and transform me in the process.

This is the prayer that seems to be the right one, or that leads me to the right one. When I ask for this, I always receive. Not always a bouquet of roses! Sometimes I am handed a Really Hard Thing To Do. Sometimes I get a kick in the pants. But I also get the privilege of feeling the Spirit guiding me to places I'd never have dared or known to go on my own, places of incomparable beauty and love. Now I know to invite the Spirit aboard, because I know what it is to go soaring on the wings of a prayer.

P R A Y E R S



Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

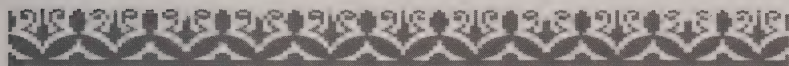
~ *Saint Francis of Assisi*
(1182-1226)

Jewish Temple Blessing

The Lord bless and keep us, the Lord make his face to shine
upon us and be gracious unto us, the Lord lift up his
countenance upon us and give us peace, now and evermore.
Amen.

~ *Seventh century B.C.*
(Numbers 6:24-26)

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE



Healing the Heart

Mary Chandler

I eased my way through the crowd and into “the church in the rock” in Helsinki, Finland and sat down next to my brother. I was his invited guest at an international music conference.

Four years before, Mother had died quietly in her sleep, but even with the passage of time, the hole in my heart had not mended.



Where was God, I wondered, when this creative, vital, joyful mother of twelve children was fighting the battle with Alzheimer’s disease? Why had God allowed her memory to be slowly snatched from her mind so that each time I visited I felt as though I hardly knew her? Where was the mother who had been my fifth-grade teacher, my best friend, my confidante, my inspiration?

Mary Chandler’s work has been widely published in national magazines, newspapers, literary journals, and on the Internet. She is a retired teacher who loves opera, travel, visiting with family and friends, and a “good read.” She lives in Rancho Santa Fe, CA.
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I thought about how Mother's classroom, over a lifetime of teaching, became the receptacle, the haven for troubled kids like Eddie. When ten-year-old Eddie brought a loaded gun to school and threatened the custodian, long before such events became commonplace, Mother "talked him down." Later in the school year, Eddie's father died. His social worker asked that my mother break the sad news. It was she who held this sobbing boy in her arms, crying with him, rocking him, comforting him.

I remember her laughter and how her sparkling brown eyes twinkled when she snuggled her grandchildren like a mother hen, delighting them with tales about cats who lived in shabby dirt houses and about boys who visited a friendly giant on the moon. Her imagination wove wonderful tales!

Sitting in that holy place waiting for the music to begin, I remembered the songs my mother sang—her sweet soprano voice rising above the others at church—and the simple songs she taught me during my childhood. I remembered her gathering my children close and teaching them those same songs.

I remembered, too, Mother kneeling in prayer, confident that God knew what she needed during those trying years when her family was young, and would answer the prayers of all who came in humble supplication. My brother's lost blue suit, new for Christmas, suddenly turned up, still wrapped, in the coal bin. Another brother recovered from hepatitis; through long bouts of ear infections and tonsillitis, my hearing was spared. Yes, God had worked miracles through this gentle woman. Her faith never wavered—but where was mine?

Soft shades of twilight crept through the stained glass windows of this unique church, creating an almost

surrealistic scene. From row upon row of organ pipes, music cascaded, reverberating among the rocks. The organist finished the prelude. Diminishing echoes prolonged the moment; then, in this sanctuary, all was silent.

The lights dimmed. On the platform stood a choir of forty-four young girls, the Children's Choir of the Bulgarian Radio and Television, dressed in white. This wonderful choir sang works by Pergolesi, Mozart, Verdi. Then a young girl about fifteen years old stepped to center stage. Her long brown hair hung softly on her shoulders. She stood perfectly still, waiting for the pianist to begin.

Soon, the strains of *Panis Angelicus*, by Cesar Franck, surrounded us. The soloist began to sing. A deep well of emotion poured from the depths of her soul, finding expression in her clear, rich, lovely voice. These children from Bulgaria, who had not yet tasted freedom from communism, joined her in song, their angelic voices soaring throughout the church.

My brother's hand met mine. Tears streamed down our cheeks. The word "Mother" formed on our lips, for we both heard the same sweet familiar voice from our childhood. It was as though my mother had come to comfort me, to touch me with her faith.

As the final notes of that beautiful song faded, my heart finally found peace.

PRAYER FOR LOVE



Don Miguel Ruiz

Don Miguel Ruiz was raised in rural Mexico by a curandera (healer) mother and nagual (shaman) grandfather in the Toltec tradition. He became a surgeon but, motivated by a near death experience in 1970, he then devoted himself to the mastery of the ancient Toltec wisdom. Don Miguel has dedicated his life to sharing this wisdom by translating it into practical concepts that promote transformation through truth and common sense. He offers "a powerful code of conduct that can rapidly transform our lives to a new experience of freedom, true happiness, and love."

He is the author of The Four Agreements, The Mastery of Love, The Four Agreements Companion Book, and Prayers. His website is at: <http://www.miguelruiz.com>.

We are going to share a beautiful dream together—a dream that you will love to have all of the time. In this dream you are in the middle of a beautiful, warm sunny day. You hear the birds, the wind, and a little river. You walk toward the river. At the edge of the river is an old man in meditation, and you see that out of his head comes a beautiful light of different colors. You try not to bother him, but he notices your presence and opens his eyes. He has the kind of eyes that are full of love and a big smile. You ask him how he is able to radiate all that beautiful light. You ask him if he can teach you to do what he is doing. He replies that many,

many years ago he asked the same question of his teacher.

The old man begins to tell you his story: "My teacher opened his chest and took out his heart, and he took a beautiful flame from his heart. Then he opened my chest, opened my heart, and he put that little flame inside it. He put my heart back in my chest, and as soon as my heart was inside me, I felt intense love, because the flame he put in my heart was his own love.

"That flame grew in my heart and became a big, big fire—a fire that doesn't burn, but purifies everything that it touches. And that fire touched each one of the cells of my body, and the cells of my body loved me back. I became one with my body, but my love grew even more. That fire touched every emotion of my mind, and all the emotions transformed into a strong and intense love. And I loved myself, completely and unconditionally.

"But the fire kept burning and I had the need to share my love. I decided to put a little piece of my love in every tree, and the trees loved me back, and I became one with the trees, but my love did not stop, it grew more. I put a piece of love in every flower, in the grass, in the earth and they loved me back, and we became one. And my love grew more and more to love every animal in the world. They responded to my love and they loved me back, and we became one. But my love kept growing and growing.

"I put a piece of my love in every crystal, in every stone in the ground, in the dirt, in the metals, and they loved me back, and I became one with the earth. And then I decided to put my love in the water, in the oceans, in the rivers, in the rain, in the snow. And they loved me back and we became one. And still my love grew more and more. I decided to give my love to the air, to the wind. I felt a strong communion with the earth, with the wind,

with the oceans, with nature, and my love grew and grew.

"I turned my head to the sky, to the sun, to the stars, and put a little piece of my love in every star, in the moon, in the sun, and they loved me back. And I became one with the moon and the sun and the stars, and my love kept growing and growing. And I put a little piece of my love in every human, and I became one with the whole of humanity. Wherever I go, whomever I meet, I see myself in their eyes, because I am a part of everything, because I love."

And then the old man opens his own chest, takes out his heart with that beautiful flame inside, and he puts that flame in your heart. And now that love is growing inside of you. Now you are one with the wind, with the water, with the stars, with all of nature, with all animals, and with all humans. You feel the heat and the light emanating from the flame in your heart. Out of your head shines a beautiful light of different colors. You are radiant with the glow of love and you pray:

Thank you Creator of the Universe, for the gift of life you have given me. Thank you for giving me everything that I have ever truly needed. Thank you for the opportunity to experience this beautiful body and this wonderful mind. Thank you for living inside me with all your love, with your pure and boundless spirit, with your warm and radiant light.

Thank you for using my words, for using my eyes, for using my heart to share your love wherever I go. I love you just the way you are, and because I am your creation, I love myself just the way I am. Help me to keep the love and the peace in my heart and to make that love a new way of life, that I may live in love the rest of my life. Amen.

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PILGRIMAGE



The Labyrinth As Teacher

Ann E. Hossler

"When the student is ready, the teacher will come." Since I first heard these words of wisdom from the East, I have held onto their message of hope and comfort. I have moved along my journey, watching almost surreptitiously for my teachers. Recently I have realized that I had unconsciously believed these teachers would be people. But now I know that the truth of this phrase is not so limited, that my teachers can be words, ideas, places, practices, objects—anything! The teachers are as limitless as the lessons.



One of the most profound teachers of my life so far has been the labyrinth. Although labyrinths were relatively unknown when I became deeply involved with them nearly ten years ago, these beautiful, unicursal (one path) "mazes"

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have become relatively common in spiritual circles. They are complex, full of twists and turns, but they are not complicated. There are no choices, no blind alleys, no ways to make mistakes. Labyrinths are not puzzles or tests. Although their defining lines are often called walls, these walls are typically no higher than a squiggle of rope. A labyrinth is simply one meandering pathway. In its most elemental form, it is a spiral.

This ancient meditation tool has given me an understanding of life that leaves me amazed and deeply grateful. I have learned about living life in metaphor, about the rhythms of birthing and letting go, about the glorious peace of humility. But perhaps the most precious lesson of my labyrinth teacher has been the fundamental call to simply “trust the path.”

At first glance, the path of a labyrinth seems intimidating. Although I know that it differs from a maze in having only one path with no decision points, still it twists and turns, winds back and forth, seem tangled and difficult. I cannot easily trace the path with my eyes as I stand at the entrance. I cannot plan my route, knowing confidently which ways I will be turning. I cannot clearly anticipate my experience on the path. This rational mind of mine that loves maps and lists cannot prepare for what will come.

Part of taking a first step along the labyrinth’s path is trusting that there is indeed only one path, and that the path will lead me through the myriad convolutions to the center and back again. If I constantly check my progress, evaluate the path, or look back or forward rather than where I am, I will most likely lose my balance or miss a turn. In judging and analyzing the path, the experience is diminished; in trusting the path, the experience is enriched.

This trust is not always simple or constant. In walking my own backyard labyrinth, a path I have walked hundreds of times, a path I know to trust in faith and experience, there are still times when I reach the more twisting inner part and question whether the path is right. Intellectually I know that I have not strayed from the path, yet my senses get confused. But always when I have trusted that the path is correct, when I have stepped forward in faith, my walk has been true and good. When I have wavered and questioned, my walk has been lessened and weak.

In walking new labyrinths, I find that I carry this trust with me. I became aware of this during a sacred walk of the large turf labyrinth on top of St. Catherine's Hill outside of Winchester, England. After struggling to figure out both its orientation (which was opposite that shown in the informational sign) and its in-the-trough pathway (which is opposite the traditional construction of turf labyrinths), I stepped onto the path fully confident that I would reach the center eventually. But in the middle of the walk, I realized that I had made a great assumption: I had put my trust in the integrity of the path in a completely unknown labyrinth. It was the recognition of my implicit, unquestioning trust that caused me to question, caused me to lose my footing, to stop, to become aware of the length and convolutions of the path. But it was becoming aware of the questioning that also affirmed my faith: this labyrinth was real. The path was true. There are no mistakes. I kept walking—and I reached the center.

Trust in the path reaches beyond its physical dimensions. A labyrinth is not merely an exercise path or a test of endurance and discipline. It is a spiritual tool, a tool of insight and sensitivity, a tool of peace and love. To

use this tool effectively I must remain open and receptive. I must trust the process. I must acknowledge that no other walker's path will be just like mine, that the insights I receive will sometimes be profound and sometimes mundane, that I may need to repeat the path for its power to work—and trust that that's okay. If I enter the labyrinth in a spirit of openness and receptivity, without demand or expectation, the walk will be good. I cannot know who I will become in the next step, but I trust that it will be right and true.

My journey of life has not been, and will not be, straight. It has been filled with twists and turns that disappointed me, that were not what I had expected or hoped. There were relationships, career choices, and even spiritual connections that did not grow as fruitfully as I had envisioned. It is so easy to let the poisons of regret and guilt and self-doubt invade my trust in the process of living. But my teacher, the labyrinth, teaches me that life, just like labyrinth walking, is a process of faith and hope and love. I am reminded that I must trust the past, and the future, and each step, each choice, along the way. All of this is life. All of this is worthy of my trust. All of this is ultimately good.



P O E T R Y



Les Jeux Sont Faits

Arnie Gerstein

When spirit has you by the sleeve,
It rearranges all the cells in your body.
You become a wide field cleared of stone
and debris ready to be imprinted with
a new spiral glyph, like ancient Celtic jewelry.
You are a filament of light leaving the lie of
dark solitude to enter the bright sky air, traceless.

Lament

Alan G. Schonfeld

The recently shattered vessel laments its state . . .
Not yet realizing its newly expanded openness
to embrace the light of the world. . .

Arnie Gerstein, a retired Professor of Humanities at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, writes poetry, translates from Hebrew to English and volunteers his time at a nearby spiritual community, Heartlight Center. He is helping to raise a new merged family, a perfect challenge with so many mirrors all about him.

Alan G. Schonfeld is a veterinarian, artist, and poet who lives in the Delaware Valley in Pennsylvania.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



Bottled Water

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



Water is a sacred part of our ordinary lives. A story told to a group of us by Dr. Bruce Rigdon brought this idea home to me in a new way. Rigdon took a group of Protestant seminary students on a tour of Russia, where they gathered in a Russian Orthodox Church on the evening before the feast of Epiphany. In the Orthodox tradition, worshipers gather on the evening before a big feast day to rehearse the events that the particular feast celebrates. In our western churches there is some confusion about whether Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the wise men from the East or whether it celebrates the baptism of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. But, there is no doubt in the Orthodox communities that Epiphany celebrates the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan.

And so the evening's celebration focused on water. All around the church were great tubs of water and, during the

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service, people felt quite free to go over and fill the bottles, jars, and pans, which they had brought from home, with water. All the hymns and liturgy focused on the theme of water.

The seminary students cowered back in the corner, maybe in confusion with all these people walking freely around filling their various containers with water. There are no chairs in an Orthodox church, and so people traditionally stand for the service and mingle around visiting with their neighbors. Eventually the worshipers came forward to be anointed with oil and to have the sign of the cross placed on their foreheads. The seminary students hung back even further. The priest, wanting to include the visitors, kept looking over to the group as if to invite them to come forward. At one point he even motioned with his head for them to come. Finally in desperation, he blurted out in English, "Don't you want to be oiled?"

After the oiling, Dr. Rigdon noticed that an elderly woman had wandered out on the porch. Because the students were so perplexed by all the things happening in the service, he took the students out on the porch in the hope that there might be some dialogue. He asked the woman, "Could you tell us why you were filling the bottles with water and what you will do with them?"

The woman answered very simply, but most profoundly. She said, "Tomorrow my daughter-in-law is to bring my first grandchild to the house, and I will give my first grandchild a bath. And I will mix some of the water from the bottle with the bath water. And I will pray to God that as I clean the body of this beautiful child, given to us as a gift, that the Spirit of God will make this child pure and holy, and that God will claim this child as God's own.

"I will then clean our house. Our house is an extension of the church because Christians live in it. It is holy space. I



Louise Hutner

will pour some of the water into the bucket I will use to scrub the house. And I will pray, 'O God, as I clean this house, make it a fit dwelling place for your Holy Spirit that we may rejoice in your presence among us.'

"And, at night, since our tongues and stomachs must enter into this feast, I will make a special soup . . . an Epiphany soup. And as I mix in the water from this bottle I have, I will pray that God might fill our hungry spirits even as God fills our hungry bodies."

Later in the conversation, one of the students asked, "Are you making holy water?"

She answered, "No, we are not making holy water. We are declaring all water holy."

What an eloquent testimony that God comes to us in the simple things of life . . . in bread and wine, in water and oil, in human touching and loving. All of these ordinary things and activities become the means by which grace is conveyed.

SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE



Caregiving for Justice

Durrell Watkins

Each new life has a story to tell, and we shall listen. Each new life goes forth from us, laying the child's sovereign claim on whole realms of being we had called our own.

~ George Kimmich Beach

When I was in college I decided to get a dog. I had never had one of my own, though I had grown up with dogs in my family. Herman was to be my first pet. I thought I knew how to be a good caregiver to a pet but I quickly learned that I was not at all prepared for the responsibility of caring for another life. I was terrible. My every effort to housebreak the dog failed, and proved frustrating for him as well. In my well-intentioned ignorance (for which I still feel pangs of guilt), I would spank the dog with newspaper when he made a mistake in the house. I thought the violent act of hitting him would teach him. But hitting the dog didn't make him conform to my will, and didn't exactly strengthen the bond between us. I am ashamed to say that my incompetence did more to frighten the dog than to teach him anything.

Rev. Durrell Watkins is pastor of the only UFMCC church in New Jersey. In addition to his parish work, Durrell has worked as an AIDS Chaplain and is an arts activist. His chosen art forms are poetry, theological writing, playwriting, and cabaret performance. He is currently a Master of Divinity candidate at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.

It never occurred to me that there might be books or classes that could help me be a better and more effective caregiver. I just insisted that I could do it, and I blamed my own failure on the “willful” and “stupid” dog. May the God of all creatures forgive me!

Eventually, my grandmother offered to take the dog. She could see that I was doing a disastrous job of caring for him. Apparently, when it came to caring for a dog I was the willful and stupid one. With wounded pride, I gave the dog to my grandmother. She loved him immediately. Within two weeks Herman was house-broken, after a year of failure with me, and he learned his lesson without my grandmother ever hitting him. That was a powerful moment in my life. I realized that love, patience, and wisdom were far more effective and superior to blame, violence, frustration, and rage. My grandmother did in two weeks what I could not do in a year.

I had tried to blame the dog, but the dog did not ask to be in my care. The failure to make him feel safe and comfortable enough to learn was my own. A kinder and wiser approach taught both me and the dog that caregiving means the caregiver is responsible for creating safety and trust. I could blame the dog endlessly, but that did not teach him a thing, and did not bring us closer together. Herman seemed to adore my grandmother, and to no surprise. Who wouldn't adore the person who treated him like he was very special?

Herman taught me a fundamental lesson that must be applied to all of us. Children, especially, are often victimized because negligent, abusive, or ill-equipped caregivers misquote a verse from Proverbs suggesting that a “rod” be used in child rearing.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child” is a line from an

English poem, not from scripture. It is similar to Prov. 13:24 which says, "He who spares his rod hates his son." The Hebrew word for "rod" can mean not only a stick for hitting, but also a stick for writing or for walking. Is the rod that is not to be spared a supportive rod like a walking stick, or a gentle, teaching rod like a quill used for writing? Perhaps Prov. 13:24 should be read in light of Psalm 23:4, "Your rod and your staff comfort me." It seems more consistent with my understanding of God and how God wants us to treat all people, that the rod God would have us use is a comforting rod, and not one that brings fear, pain, or resentment.

How much damage will continue to be done by the irresponsible use of scripture? When will we finally say, "Violence is wrong!" No matter how often people justify violence by citing the Bible, it is wrong, and we can choose love instead.

Children should be treated as special gifts from God. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all children grew up believing that they were adored, unconditionally, by the people who cared for them? Wouldn't it be great if they were taught with gentleness and love that they were persons of sacred value? Children who are taught to love themselves, and who believe that they are unconditionally loved, may grow up to be adults who don't feel the need to promote any form of intolerance or violence.

We must learn to be better caregivers, especially of children. We can remind them every chance we get that they are beautiful, smart, and capable of great things. We need to be sure they feel safe, respected, and unconditionally loved. We need to teach the next generation, by example, to live in love. Only then can we hope for a world free of bigotry, intolerance, and violence.

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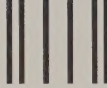
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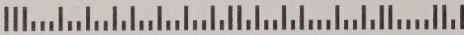
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